

# A Guide to Organizing Car-Free Days



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## Contents

Background	
Why Car-free?	p. 1
So You Want to Organize a Car-free Day?	p. 1
What was Car-Free Fremont?	p. 2
Getting Started	
Breaking the Ice	p. 3
Core Values	p. 3
Red Tape : Laying the Groundwork	
Permits, Insurance, Infrastructure	p. 4
Logistics	
Area	p. 5
Location	p. 5
Timing	p. 6
Attendance	p. 6
Structure	p. 6
Volunteers	p. 6
Communication	p. 6
Publicity	p. 7
Mistakes We Made	p. 8
Resources	back cover





## Background

### Why Car-free?

The car-free movement aims to change government policy and individual habits so that cities evolve to primarily accommodate people, not cars. The benefits of reducing car use include more green space, tighter communities, better mass transit, and cleaner air. Ideally, a car-free day will celebrate the streets as public space, educate the public as to the need for sustainable transportation policy, and demonstrate popular support for alternatives to car culture.

### So, You Want to Organize a Car-Free Day?

Good for you. Like us, you probably feel people's overall quality of life will improve if they use their cars less. But how do you change habits and break automobile addiction? A good place to start is by hosting a car-free day in your neighborhood. This manual is intended to help you plan, promote, and put on your car-free day. Because car-free events are a relatively new concept, this isn't intended to be the last word on the subject. What we hope to do is share our experience in putting on Car-Free Fremont—the first city-sponsored car-free day in the U.S.—so that you can benefit from our successes and avoid some of the mistakes we made. Some of these guidelines and suggestions are specific to car-free issues, and others are more general event organizing tips which we thought important enough to mention.



Muckelfugga, an amphibious 4-person kinetic sculpture, rolls over and through Car-Free Fremont's mid-street living room.

## What was Car-Free Fremont?

Car-Free Fremont took place on Sunday, September 16, 2001 in Seattle's Fremont neighborhood, a mixed business and residential community of 12,000 known for its pedestrian-friendly downtown. Our mission was to reclaim the streets, celebrate walkable communities, and raise awareness of all forms of alternative transportation. Despite the cold and the grey, several hundred people came out to participate in a variety of activities in a two square block "car-free zone":

- Panel discussions featuring residents, business owners, elected officials, and transportation experts on the topics "Living Car-free" and "A Car-free Future in Seattle."
- Information booths for a number of alternative transportation organizations, including the International Bicycle Federation, King County Metro, and the Elevated Transportation Company (monorail).
- A roller disco, Central Park style.
- Bike repair workshop courtesy of Wright Brothers Cycles, a neighborhood shop.
- An art bike auction as a benefit for Bike Works, a local non-profit group which teaches children to repair and maintain bicycles.
- Bike decorating workshops courtesy of Free Range Cycles, an area bike shop.
- Free inline skating lessons courtesy of SkateAbility, a Seattle skate school.
- Special appearances by a variety of art bikes, hand built bikes and kinetic sculptures.

## **Getting Started**

### **Breaking the Ice**

Chances are, your municipality has never heard of a “car-free day,” so be ready to educate. The process by which we got a permit to close the streets was not designed for car-free days, and we had to work around its constraints. Because it was a foreign concept to the City, we didn’t get everything we wanted, but we were able to set a precedent which we hope will help you in getting the necessary support and permits to host your car-free day. Focus your goals, establish your values, and then pay close attention to the details of planning, organization, and execution of your event.

### **Core Values**

A couple of core values guided the development of Car-Free Fremont. We wanted this event to be about participating, not consuming. This meant that we made a decision early on not to sell anything and not to accept any kind of sponsorship. Of course, we had a grant from the City of Seattle to produce the event and this made it easier not to have to worry about money, but we feel very strongly that the no-selling policy was crucial in making Car-Free Fremont the successful grass-roots event it was. We also wanted to support, not compete with local businesses. Businesses are very concerned about customer convenience and are protective of automobile access and parking. It was our hope to show these businesses that they actually benefit from an increase in walk-by pedestrian traffic.

We were also careful to keep our message positive – even though a car-free day implies an absence, it’s important to point out that a void can be a positive thing. We tried to emphasize all the things you can do in an urban environment when there are no cars on the streets, rather than saying “look how *bad* cars are.” At one point, we considered doing a car-smash, but then decided against it, concluding that one attracts more flies with honey than vinegar. Accentuate the positive.

## **Red Tape: Laying the Groundwork**

Make friends with your city and they will be your greatest ally. Our first step was getting a grant from a city program aimed at reducing car use. With their endorsement, getting the requisite permit, insurance, and neighborhood support was much easier.

### **Permits**

For Car-Free Fremont, we needed a special events permit, which required some phone calls to the city, circulating a petition of neighborhood support, and attending a special events committee meeting. The type of permit you will need is dependent on local codes, so be sure to find out early what you will need to secure the street closure you desire. For details on the process we went through in Seattle, visit our web site at [www.thinksmall.org/car-free/](http://www.thinksmall.org/car-free/).

### **Insurance**

Chances are your street closure permit will require some form of liability insurance. In our case, a local arts organization allowed us to attach Car-Free Fremont as a rider on their policy. This saved us a lot of money and trouble. Again, you will need to make some phone calls. A good place to start is your local chamber of commerce or neighborhood association. Keep in mind that for a car-free day to make an impact it needs to involve as many people as possible. Make the most of these calls to spread the word and solicit support for your efforts.

### **Infrastructure**

Your largest expense will probably be barricades, public toilets, and waste management, none of which were covered by our permit fee. In addition, you will want to provide adequate informational and directional signage for day of event. It took us ten volunteers, several sheets of plywood, gallons of paint, and a week of work parties to create and deploy signs in the neighborhood directing people to the event.



## **Logistics**

There are a number of factors to consider when planning a car-free day. The better idea you have from the outset about how to address them, the easier it will be to plan for the event: what processes to go through with the city, how much time and money is needed to make it happen, the type of events to organize, and how much and what type of publicity will be necessary to draw in people.

### **1. Area**

How large an area will be closed to cars? You and some neighbors can easily organize a small event on your block that will raise awareness and stimulate discussion. On the other hand, with some more time and effort, a larger car-free day will make more of an impact. Quiet streets, freedom to ride bikes, play ball, and cross the street without having to look both ways, and the sudden acquisition of acres and acres of open space will make it easier for people to notice how much cars affect our urban environment.

Car-Free Fremont took up 2 very long city blocks. The requested zone was larger, but we met opposition from a single business which insisted its members not be inconvenienced by having to walk half a block (this was especially ironic because it was a health club). The lesson here is try to get support in advance from everyone in your proposed car-free zone. Even if they are not for the event, they will appreciate being informed early on that it is taking place. Also, ask for a larger zone that you expect to get. This leaves some room for bargaining and demonstrates your willingness to compromise.

### **2. Location**

Do you want to block off an area that typically has more traffic (business districts, arterials) or will your car-free area be located in a lower-traffic residential area? Again, it will take more time and effort in order to have a more visible impact. Blocking off a low-traffic, residential area will obviously be easier than blocking off a business district, which will require taking a lot of time and negotiation to make sure the needs of the business owners can be met. A car-free day can bring in a lot of people to the neighborhood, but businesses still may be apprehensive. Others may need some limited access during the day so that they can load and unload.

We took a compromise approach for Car-Free Fremont, choosing an area located on the edge of the main business district. Most of the commercial activity in the area was offices that weren't open on Sundays. The other businesses (a pub, a bike shop, the Fremont Fine Arts Foundry) were ones that were actively supportive of our event.

### **3. Timing**

What time, and what day of the week would this event take place? For all-day events, weekends are best. Weeknights would be okay for an event that's only a few hours. Again, it's unclear what you'd have to go through to have an ongoing car-free day, one that takes place once a week, or even once a month.

### **4. Attendance**

Is this a neighborhood event, or do you want to bring people in from all over the city? Knowing who you want to reach will help determine the nature of the event and the extent of the publicity.

### **5. Structure**

How much do you want to structure the event? It can be a fairly unstructured affair, where neighbors just come out and enjoy the street space - kids can play in the street, you can organize a barbecue, etc. We chose to make Car-Free Fremont more complex. Since most people didn't know what a car-free day was all about, we thought it would be best to have a bit more structure. We organized information booths, panel discussions, and a variety of activities that people could participate in - all designed to raise awareness of alternative transportation, car-free lifestyles, and reclaiming the streets.

### **6. Volunteers**

Develop a volunteer network. We set up an email list through Yahoo groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>) to coordinate tasks and announce meetings, but phones work best for getting commitments and talking specifics. In all, we estimate that 50 to 80 people had a hand in making Car-Free Fremont go. Our volunteers hung posters, painted signs, made phone calls, and ran multitudinous errands to make the day a reality. We held a number of fun yet productive work parties and kept our volunteers happy day of event with free food and drink.

### **7. Communication**

Talk to neighbors, neighborhood associations/councils, and businesses. No matter what the size of the event, don't skip the outreach! Good relations with the neighbors and businesses is essential, and being pro-active helps immensely. People want to know what's going on in their neighborhood. Go door to door, talk to people, and explain the event. The idea of a car-free day is a new concept for most people. Most of the people we talked to thought it was a great idea after we told them more about it. If you have time, work with the other residents and/or businesses

(possibly through the local Chamber of Commerce or Neighborhood Council) to choose the location of the car-free area.



### **Publicity**

**Press releases.** We sent out three: one about six weeks before the event, one three weeks before, and one the week of the event. It would have been nice to do more - apparently, this is one of those things you can't overdo. We also created a press kit with background information, car-free clippings, and a full complement of our promotional materials.

**Press Tent.** Our volunteer headquarters doubled as a press tent on the day of the event. It's a good idea to provide a central meeting point for media where reporters can pick up press kits and refresh themselves with food and drink. Provide a cell phone number where you can be reached day of event to give interviews and guide media to the heart of the action.

**Flyers.** We really regret not flyering door-to-door in the neighborhood, something we intended to do that got lost in the shuffle. Don't get so wrapped up in trying to get media coverage that you lose sight of the fact that you're trying to reach people.

**Websites.** It really helped to have a website - even something simple is a great way for people to find out the basics of your event. People from all over the place found Car-Free Fremont through the web, and we got a lot of volunteers that way too (<http://www.thinksmall.org/car-free/>).

**Word of mouth.** Tell all your friends and neighbors, they'll tell their friends, and so on . . . you'll be surprised at how many people you can reach this way.

**Neighborhood papers (and other newspapers in town)** are always looking for interesting stories and offer very cheap advertising rates. We were even able to get some free ad space because a certain marketing director liked the idea so much.

**Local businesses.** Encourage the participation of local businesses as much as possible - especially bike shops and any other businesses that are especially community-minded. They are your best allies.

**Environmental and alternative transportation organizations and bike clubs** will often be willing to post related listings on their websites, send announcements to their email lists, and even put a link to a website up on their sites.

### **Mistakes We Made**

We learn by making mistakes, but hopefully what we learned the hard way will save you some trouble and benefit future car-free events.

**Outreach.** Do as much as humanly possible. We wish we'd spent more time going door to door, flyering cars in the neighborhood, talking to schools and businesses. We wanted Car-Free Fremont to reach beyond "the choir" (those who are already car-free or car-lite), but to do that we should have made a broader effort to talk to and/or partner with businesses, schools, and even auto users - which most people are.

**Communication.** Communicate early and often with participants. Be specific - don't assume people will know what they need to set up a booth. Ask them. Will they need electricity? A table? A canopy? Water? Make sure people know exactly when and where to set up - you may not be around to show them. Get signoff for advertising blurbs, check spelling of names, and don't forget to thank people profusely. Get confirmation of their attendance in writing, if possible, and be sure to follow up with phone calls as the event approaches .

Having one person as a central point of contact for participants helps immensely. Our shotgun approach of contacting potential participants (where people set up participants using whatever connections they had) was difficult to keep track of and led to some things falling through the cracks and some mixed messages. In this case, it would be best to have volunteers with connections make an initial phone call and then let the main contact person follow up.

**Provide Events for Kids.** Most of the activities we organized were for the grown-ups, and we wish we'd planned more stuff specifically for kids. Kids not only spend a whole lot of time on skates/bikes/scooters/skateboards, they've been known to teach their parents a thing or two.

## **Resources and Contacts**

To contact Sarah or Rob, organizers of Car-Free Fremont:  
sarah@gogoweb.com or rob@zverina.com

We'd be glad to give advice, share our contacts, help plan future projects, and give more detail on any aspect of this introductory guide. Also, please send us your links!

**For information on the City of Seattle's CarSmart Communities Program, which funded Car-Free Fremont call (206) 615-1550 or visit:** [www.ci.seattle.wa.us/carsmart](http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/carsmart)

### **Car-Free Websites and Resources**

Adbusters Automobile Tickets – [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)  
Carfree\_cities - [www.carfree.com](http://www.carfree.com)  
Carfree email list (global) <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CarFree>  
Car-Free Fremont – [www.thinksmall.org/car-free/](http://www.thinksmall.org/car-free/)  
Carfree Times: (E-newsletter) [www.carfree.com/cft/index.html](http://www.carfree.com/cft/index.html)  
Do you really need to own a car? [www.verdant.net/cars.htm](http://www.verdant.net/cars.htm)  
Earth Car Free Day – [www.carfreeday.com](http://www.carfreeday.com)  
LESS TRAFFIC! - [www.lesstraffic.com](http://www.lesstraffic.com)  
Portland Intersection Repair - [www.cityrepair.org/ir.html](http://www.cityrepair.org/ir.html)  
Seattle CarSmart Communities - [www.ci.seattle.wa.us/carsmart](http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/carsmart)  
The SUV Ticket - [www.baaction.org/SUVticket/](http://www.baaction.org/SUVticket/)  
World Car Free Day - [www.carbusters.ecn.cz/WCFD.htm](http://www.carbusters.ecn.cz/WCFD.htm)

